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Bookshelf

"Secret Agenda"
By Jim Hougan

Reinvestigating Watergate: The Elusive Glow of Truth

By JONATHAN KWITNY

A decade and more than 150 books after Watergate, one would think we had read enough about our "long national nightmare," as President Ford called it upon declaring it "over." We have read the facts and the tortured rationalizations of the culprits, and most of us think we understand it as well as we ever will.

But no. Now, with new revelations, comes Jim Hougan, a contributing editor of Harper's magazine. Turning accepted history on its ear with meticulous detail, his book "Secret Agenda" (Random House, 347 pages, \$19.95) shows that what really happened at the Democratic National Headquarters that June night in 1972 was . . . was . . . was . . .

Welcome to the labyrinthine world of Jim Hougan. For those who like neat answers and the orderly what-happened-of-newspaper journalism, Mr. Hougan's world may be uncomfortable. His previous book, "Spooks," was a frightening compendium of misconduct in the intelligence business, public and private. But it left us uncertain whether we were reading about rotten apples or a global conspiracy. Mr. Hougan himself didn't know.

Once again, in "Secret Agenda," Mr. Hougan is full of fascinating, even jolting, information. But his conclusions form like thin ice on a deep swamp. Some reviewers have chided him for this, not understanding that Mr. Hougan is as much impressionist as reporter. The light that draws us through this book is neither the end of the tunnel nor a freight train approaching, but rather the elusive glow of truth, moving away from us at about the speed we move toward it. Our frustration comes not from haste or sloppiness on the part of the author, but from the effort to puzzle out where he is leading us.

This problem is compounded in "Secret Agenda" because the publisher bills it as straight expose. News releases have reduced the book to a simple thesis that bypasses the tangles actually at the center of Mr. Hougan's vision. The thesis is that the particular break-in that led to the Watergate arrests was designed not to bug, but to remove bugs planted by the Central Intelligence Agency in previous break-ins.

Watergate, Mr. Hougan tells us, "was not so much a partisan political scandal as it was, secretly, a sex scandal, the unpredictable outcome of a CIA operation that,

in the simplest of terms, tripped on its own shoelaces." He adds that "our recent history is a forgery, the by-product of secret agents acting on secret agendas of their own."

The real Watergate bugging, according to this thesis, had served to monitor the making of appointments by a CIA-controlled prostitution ring designed to discover the sex habits of the ring's prominent clients, including "at least one U.S. senator, an astronaut, a Saudi prince . . . and a host of prominent Democrats." The Nixon reelection committee, because of its unscrupulousness, was used by the CIA as a handy cover for the sex-ring operation. To this end, the Committee to Re-elect the President was duped by two double agents, E. Howard Hunt and James McCord, whose real loyalty was to the CIA.

When the sex ring was busted, shortly before the renowned 1972 break-in, the scheme fractured beyond repair. "In effect," writes Mr. Hougan, "the snake had swallowed its tail: CIA agents working under cover of the CRP came to be targeted against their own operation by the very organization that unwittingly provided them with cover. All that the agents could do was stall and, when all else failed, blow their own cover."

Mr. Hougan supplies plenty of evidence in "Secret Agenda" that tends to support this thesis, including previously unpublished Federal Bureau of Investigation files that Mr. Hougan says he was the first to uncover under the Freedom of Information Act. But he never asserts the truth of this thesis in the case-closed way that has been part of accepted Watergate reporting. Instead, he throws us a welter of questions that drag the story beyond the sex-ring thesis and ultimately beyond comprehension.

Indeed, Mr. Hougan's whole world is a multilayered puzzle. Mr. McCord, a family man with a 20-year CIA career, turns up in 1969 (or maybe 1970—contradictory facts abound) claiming to be a private Pentagon consultant, and renting a basement bachelor apartment in Washington from a nice little old lady who insists he neither smoke nor entertain women. Then she throws him out because of the cuties he parades home,

one of whom is crying on his bed at the denouement.

Now add that Mr. McCord was a "rectitudinous" man who probably didn't cheat on his wife, that the apartment also contained bugging equipment and that one of Mr. McCord's visitors was E. Howard Hunt. This contradicts the story Messrs. Hunt and McCord told the White House (and later testified to), which was that they hadn't met until much later, after taking jobs at the White House. Mr. Hougan has evidence that they had worked together for the CIA since the 1950s. Now add that the nice little old lady discloses to the author that, incidentally, she is a retired chief of research of a Pentagon intelligence bureau.

This isn't a highlight of the book, it's just another page.

What is really going on at this rooming house? And everywhere else? You can't demand precise answers to such questions if you want to float with Mr. Hougan.

One person who doesn't stop demanding precise answers is Bob Woodward, who with Carl Bernstein won a Pulitzer Prize for the Washington Post for putting Watergate on the map. This reviewer went to Mr. Woodward because we come from the same school of reporting, which says that if you don't know something it's only because you haven't made enough phone calls.

Mr. Woodward, though very gentlemanly about it, is angry over Mr. Hougan's account, which includes a chapter speculating on the identity of the famed source, Deep Throat. While "Secret Agenda" explicitly praises Bob Woodward for doing as much as he did, it implies that he didn't accomplish the Houganian impossible of finding ultimate truth, and that he even misled readers about his sources.

Mr. Woodward has factual responses to Mr. Hougan. The flower pot Mr. Woodward says he moved on his apartment balcony to signal his "Deep Throat" source could have been seen from an alley that existed back in 1972, he says; Mr. Hougan asserts that the balcony was blocked from normal public view. Mr. Woodward complains that Mr. Hougan never asked for his comment on such matters. But the real nature of their dispute is the nature of truth itself.

"In everybody's life there are curious circumstances," Mr. Woodward says. "But what he [Mr. Hougan] lacks here is somebody who has evidence who can put it all together." He [Mr. Hougan] sure does.

Ultimately, Mr. Woodward says, Mr. Hougan has only "an interesting theory." It sure is.

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